

## Civil War Book Review

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### Soldier, Surgeon, Scholar: The Memoirs of William Henry Corbusier 1844-1930

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## Review

Nacy, Michele

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**Wooster, Robert, Editor** *Soldier, Surgeon, Scholar: The Memoirs of William Henry Corbusier 1844-1930*. University of Oklahoma Press, \$29.95 ISBN 806135492

Western expansion

Army life on the American frontier

The publication of the memories of Fanny Corbusier and her husband William Corbusier provides historians with a unique opportunity to examine, side by side, the recollections of an Army officer and his wife. The life of the western garrisons has often been portrayed as male societies, with little attention paid to the women who shared their environment. These two works provide a new dimension and a more complete understanding of life in the garrisons of the American frontier.

**Fanny Dunbar Corbusier: Recollections of Her Army Life, 1869-1908** adds to the growing collection of letters and memoirs of army officers' wives who accompanied their husbands to isolated and often dangerous Army garrisons in the West during the last 25 years of the 19th century. Fanny Corbusier spent a remarkable amount of time on the frontier, and her recollections bring the reader vivid detailed descriptions of every manner of plant and animal. Like her army sisters, Fanny enjoyed the freedom and natural beauty of the vast western wilderness. Her description of watching a great copper-colored cloud, the shape of a scroll, unroll itself and pour down a deluge of water is but one example of the splendid pictures she paints with her words. Fanny spent an inordinate amount of time with a diverse group of Native American tribes. She recalls adventures with the Zuni, Navajo, Apache Yuma, Oglala, Cheyenne, and Shoshone. Fanny Corbusier, like her fellow army officers' wives, was among the first white women, particularly of middle-class background, to encounter the diverse culture, religion, and societies of the American Indians. She writes about her experiences with fear, anxiety and admiration. Her descriptions and reactions

to these Indians give a whole new meaning to experiencing diversity.

The adaptability of the army officers' wives has been chronicled in numerous books, letters, and remembrances. Fanny Corbusier provides yet another example of the continuing flexibility of these remarkable women. Fanny said it best when she wrote Father and I had become by this time quite expert in devising ways and means of making ourselves comfortable, and we could improvise anything necessary for living the simple life. Her stories illustrate the resilience of army officers' wives, a truly amazing group of women. They were middle-class women (and in Fanny's case, Southern) who grew up with the values and ideals of true womanhood yet spent the majority of their adult life in an environment that continually challenged such notions. Fanny lived in all manner of dwelling, and traveled hundreds of miles by all means of transportation from station to station following her husband's assignments. She traveled the same routes, lived in the same hovels, and experienced the same attacks on her middle-class sensibilities as many of her contemporaries.

William Corbusier was a career Army officer and surgeon. During his forty-four year career (1864-1908), Corbusier recorded his adventures at 17th military assignments and provides meticulous descriptions of military campaigns and life on military posts. These insights are recorded in **Soldier, Surgeon, Scholar: The Memoirs of William Henry Corbusier, 1844-1930**. As an avid ethnologist, Corbusier studied and published works examining the languages, cultures, ceremonies, and medical practices of American Indians. Wooster says that Corbusier is more a chronicler than an editorialist, he favored description rather than analysis. His memoirs are replete with vivid and clear descriptions of the men in his unit, his quarters, and particularly fascinating, his sweat-bath with the Shoshones in 1881. An additional feature of both Corbusier memoirs is the inclusion of their tours in the Philippines û giving yet another dimension to the developing picture of life in the Army in the 19th century.

The real benefit of these companion pieces is that the reader can compare the recollections of each writer during the same period of time. For example, both write about their tour of duty at Camp Date Creek, Arizona Territory in 1873. Dr. Corbusier recalls the encounters with the native tribes and gives great detail about being in the field against Apache. Fanny Corbusier covers the same assignment, with stories of quarters, available foodstuffs, Gila monsters, and the officers and their wives. Although it seems obvious that Fanny was aware of her husband's military campaigns, she writes about her daily domestic world with no

mention of her husband's military forays against hostile Apache. Her only reference to Native Americans in this chapter is her complaint that she had lost her Indian laundress when the Apache Yuma Indians were taken to the Rio Verde Reservation.

Taken together, the memoirs of Fanny Dunbar Corbusier and William Henry Corbusier add a tremendous dimension to the ever-emerging picture of the lives of families that inhabited the garrisons of the U.S. Army in the 19th century. Forever thought of as a male domain, gaps in the history of the western garrison are being filled in with the stories of women who shared these military posts with their husbands. These stories begin to give us a multi-dimensional picture of diversity, relationships, and adventure in the west.

*Michele Nacy earned a Ph.D. from Kansas State University and published Members of the-Regiment: Army Officers' Wives on the Western Frontier, 1865-1980. Recently Adjunct Professor at Oakland University ( Rochester, MI), Wayne State University (Detroit, MI), and Oakland Community College (Oakland county-Michigan. Presently she is an adjunct professor at Pacific Lutheran University.*